

ROBERTA AT THE CAPITOL AND ROXY: FASHION, CINEMA, AND MODERNITY IN INTERWAR BUCHAREST**

Sonia D. Andraş*

Abstract: *This paper follows the distribution, reception, and influence of Hollywood productions, using the particular case of the movie Roberta, starring Irene Dunne, Fred Astaire, and Ginger Rogers. It follows all stages from preparation, production, dissemination, and critique, and how they were seen from and reacted to in interwar Bucharest. The timeline focuses on the mid-1930s and two-three years before and after. Owing to the difficulties experienced by cinema studios on both sides of the Atlantic and the impending financial crisis in Hollywood, the movie had to rely on the popular Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers pair. Because of this change, the original story was modified to fit the two dancing stars, promising more of a Fred and Ginger extravaganza than a typical romantic musical. Because Roberta did not follow the Fred and Ginger formula, it was soon overtaken by the pair's largest success, Top Hat, released roughly a year later and has remained largely ignored. The movie was first shown in Bucharest seven months after its initial release in March 1935, at the cinemas Capitol and Roxy, then American, and, finally, Orfeu, until early 1937. Movie reviews and reactions abounded in the general and specialized press, especially in 1936. Beyond its perceptible flaws in plot coherence and expected cinematic experience, Roberta can now be viewed as the closest snapshot into mid-1930s realities, from the level of the story, its modifications from the original informed by financial and censorship reasonings, the necessary promotional language and actions, and its reception, focusing on interwar Bucharest. It can provide valuable social, cultural, aesthetic, and even political clues about the United States, Hollywood in particular, and 1930s Bucharest in its modernity, cosmopolitanism, or fashion-consuming aspects.*

Keywords *Roberta, Hollywood, fashion, Bucharest, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Irene Dunne*

Before the musical-fashion pairing between Fred Astaire and Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face*, there was the 1935 musical success *Roberta*¹ with the

* PhD., Associate Researcher, The “Gheorghe Șincai” Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities, Târgu Mureș, sonia.d.andras@gmail.com.

** This article was supported by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development, and Innovation Funding–UEFISCDI, the National Research Council – CNCS, the Ministry of National Education (Romania), Project PN–III–P4–PCE–2021–0688, Contract 29 from 27 May 2022, title *The Ethos of Dialogue and Education: Romanian – American Cultural Negotiations (1920–1940)*.

¹ *Roberta*, Comedy, Musical, Romance (RKO Radio Pictures, 1935), 45.

same Astaire. He starred as an American big-band orchestra leader, Huckleberry (Huck) Haines, this time alongside Ginger Rogers as Lizzie Gatz, Huck's childhood sweetheart, pretending to be a Countess Scharwenka. The cast also included Irene Dunne as Stephanie, *Roberta*'s main fashion designer and Russian princess, Randolph Scott as Haines' sports coach friend, John Kent, and Helen Westley as Roberta, the fashion house owner. Musical and dance numbers included *Let's Begin*, *Yesterdays*, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, *I'll Be Hard to Handle*, *I Won't Dance*, and *Lovely to Look At*². From the studio's perspective, *Roberta* was filmed and promoted following the success of *The Gay Divorce*, including enough space for the cinemagoing audience to applaud after the Astaire-Rogers performances³. But the movie's story is much more complex. This paper uses the case of the movie *Roberta* to illustrate Hollywood's influence in interwar Bucharest, focusing on cinema schedules, posters, reviews, and visual materials accessible to the mid-1930s cinema-going public in Romania's capital. It uses cinema studies and semiotics to interpret the primary visual and written texts relevant to the movie itself, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, or Romania's perception of Hollywood in the 1930s.

Roberta started as a novel, *Gowns by Roberta*, published in September 1933⁴, only a year before the movie's start of filming. The musical adaptation by Jerome Kern and Otto Harbach, with a title simplified to *Roberta*, first opened on Broadway at the *New Amsterdam Theatre* a month later and ran until July 1934, with almost three hundred performances⁵. The musical also enjoyed a run in Australia since December 1933⁶ and a tour by the original Broadway cast from the fall of 1934 until March 1935, and as music historian Geoffrey Block asserted, "only modestly eclipsing the opening of the film version at Radio City Hall" roughly a week earlier⁷. The original Broadway cast included Bob Hope as Huckleberry Haines, Tamara (Drasin) as Princess Stephanie, Raymond E. Middleton as John Kent, Fay Templeton as Aunt Minnie (Roberta), and Lyda Roberti as Mme. Nunez/Clementina Scharwenka. Besides the 1935 film adaptation, the play was converted into a 1969 NBC color television series starring Bob Hope in his original stage role alongside Michele Lee, John Davidson, Eve McVeagh, and Janis Paige. New World Records also released an album with all the songs in the Broadway production, presented as the first time the entire musical score was

² Arlene Croce, *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book* (London: W.H. Allen, 1972). Edward Gallafent, *Astaire & Rogers. A Movie Book* (Moffat: Cameron & Hollis, 2000), 24.

³ Ibid, 46.

⁴ Alice Duer Miller, *Gowns by Roberta* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1933).

⁵ "Roberta – Broadway Musical – Original | IBDB", *Internet Broadway Database, IBDB*, 2023, <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/roberta-11791>, Accessed October 19, 2023.

⁶ "Roberta. Brilliant Production at His Majesty's", *The Age*, December 24, 1934, 10.

⁷ Geoffrey Block, "Refashioning *Roberta*: From Novel to Stage to Screen", in *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Theatre Screen Adaptations*, ed. Dominic McHugh (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), (29–53) 33.

recorded⁸. This paper will focus on the 1935 movie starring Irene Dunne, Fred Astaire, and Ginger Rogers and how the Bucharest cinemagoing public received it. The timeline is set around 1935 and 1937 and a couple of years before and after, representing the conception, production, dissemination, and conclusion phases of *Roberta*'s Bucharest's official run, as presented especially in Bucharest's principal cinema theatre schedules. This paper's timeline covers the peak of the Fred and Ginger era, starting shortly before its greatest success with *Top Hat*, *Roberta*'s direct successor, and ending as the former outclassed and began to outrun the 1935 movie headlined by Irene Dunne.

The Fred Astaire – Ginger Rogers partnership peaked in 1936 when they were listed third in box office success, following Shirley Temple and Clark Gable⁹. While Astaire remains one of the best-known stars connected to dance, Ginger Rogers was herself unique as a partner. As dance critic Arlene Croce explained, Rogers would be the Moon to Astaire's Sun, as a reflection who could also emanate her light, creating "the feeling that stirs us so deeply when we see them together"¹⁰. But in terms of movie popularity, Rogers was already better known to audiences, but she only became a star when partnering with Astaire¹¹. Because it deviated from the formula, *Roberta* did not manage to become an everlasting chapter in the Astaire-Rogers story. The pair survived and succeeded the following year with *Top Hat*, which *Roberta* could and probably did not intend to achieve. But *Roberta* was still profitable at least for a couple of years after its initial release. But to understand the movie's impact on interwar Bucharest, it is first necessary to contextualize its world from the production environment, worldwide distribution, and localized consumption, focusing on interwar Bucharest.

Roberta's World

The movie *Roberta* was born in a decade marked on one side by the Great Depression and the other by the start of World War Two. Hollywood mirrored the United States and the world's upheavals. It continued to promote its "dream factory" identity, but as the 1930s approached their midpoint, it became increasingly unsustainable financially and in censorship terms¹². While Hollywood was projected as a citadel of freedom and glamour, its political-geographic reality

⁸ Kim Crisswell, "Jerome Kern: Roberta", Record Company Website, New World Records, November 1, 2014, <https://www.newworldrecords.org/products/roberta-original-score>, Accessed October 19, 2023.

⁹ Croce, *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book*, 5.

¹⁰ Ibid, 6.

¹¹ Ibid, 16

¹² Adrienne L. McLean, "Introduction: Stardom in the 1930s", in *Glamour in a Golden Age: Movie Stars of the 1930s*, ed. Adrienne L. McLean, Star Decades: American Culture/American Cinema (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), (1–17) 1–2.

was less liberal. The American cinema industry had been subject to local, state, and federal censorship regulations since its inception. Hollywood began a process of self-censorship in 1930 by establishing a Production Code to avoid delays in production and subsequent financial losses. However, a Production Code Administration was formed in 1934 to fend off accusations that the Code enforcement was too lenient¹³. The need to regulate film production was even more pressing, considering film theorist Stephen Handzo's assertion that before World War Two, the cinemagoing public was deemed predominantly female, even if production itself was preeminently in the hands of men¹⁴. The filming and production of *Roberta* thus began right as 'The Code' was starting to disrupt Hollywood's practices and main characters. As Handzo noted, Betty Boop became a housewife and lost momentum due to these changes, while Shirley Temple was a rising star¹⁵. It is then safe to assume that expressing romantic feelings in the form of highly technical, more evocative than passionate dance, as seen with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, reached a time of favorable winds for it to sail into cinema and world history. Interwar Bucharest's unwritten morality codes and increasingly strict State regulations and censorship would fit perfectly into Hollywood's zeitgeist.

Unlike the musical's public, cinemagoers went to see *Roberta* primarily for their new favorite pair: Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The two belonged to the stars signed to the studio RKO Pictures¹⁶, alongside *Roberta* costar Irene Dunne, Katharine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, and Lucille Ball¹⁷. *The Gay Divorce*, marketed everywhere except for Great Britain as *The Gay Divorcee* due to new cinema regulations, marked the beginning of the partnership. It was, therefore, logical for studios to not only use a recent success to promote a new movie with the same stars and profit from their great potential to equal and, why not, surpass the initial hit with a now-winning formula:

Thus the Astaire-Rogers formula came into being. The plots were to be as relatively simple as possible. Usually, Astaire was a hoofer who knew no bounds in chasing his lady-love – the self-possessed Ginger – and getting her, no matter how many songs had to be sung or dances danced. The productions were glossy: pure white settings, fixtures, and furniture. The musical numbers were to be an integral part of the story line and Astaire was to have at least one specialty, while Ginger was to have one solo. The supporting cast would contain an Edward Everett Horton, a Helen Broderick, an Eric Blore, or a Franklin Pangborn, or all four¹⁸.

¹³ Stephen Handzo, *Hollywood and the Female Body. A History of Idolization and Objectification* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2019), 1.

¹⁴ Ibid, 2.

¹⁵ Ibid, 57.

¹⁶ RKO stood for Radio-Keith-Orpheum. The studio was active between 1929 and 1959. After RKO's official demise, individual movies were purchased by various studios, including Disney, Paramount, and Columbia.

¹⁷ McLean, "Introduction", 7.

¹⁸ Homer Dickens, *The Films of Ginger Rogers* (Secaucus: The Citadel Press, 1975), 17–18.

Even more, as film theorist Adrienne L. McLean pointed out, regardless of the studio and their differences in looks, styles, genres, or talents, all major movie stars “shared at least one feature: they were white”. With a few notable exceptions, including Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind*, studios did not allow non-white actors to play leading roles. In contrast, “protagonists were played by stars, and most film narratives involved a romance of some kind”¹⁹. The Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers partnership, with one exception, can be described as an exclusively 1930s affair, and even though both had lucrative careers individually, “the star image of each has remained strongly informed by association with the other”²⁰. The ‘pair’ was born in 1933 with *42nd Street and Gold Diggers of 1933*²¹ and would remain among the top-grossing couples on the screen²². The partnership peaked three years later when they were listed third in box office success, following Shirley Temple and Clark Gable²³. While Astaire remains one of the best-known stars connected to dance, Ginger Rogers was herself unique as a partner. As dance critic Arlene Croce explained, Rogers would be the Moon to Astaire’s Sun, as a reflection who could also emanate her light, creating “the feeling that stirs us so deeply when we see them together”²⁴. But in terms of movie popularity, Rogers was already better known to audiences, but she only became a star when partnering with Astaire²⁵. On a more personal level, film theorist Edward Gallafent noted that Astaire-Rogers remain the only 1930s-1940s cinema pair still primarily known by their first names, Fred and Ginger, unlike Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy or Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall²⁶.

Roberta was two years shy of Hollywood’s recession period with a relatively conventional theme and plot, arguably saved by the presence of Astaire and Rogers. Film theorist Adrienne Mclean pointed out the contrast between the low financial turnout starting in 1937 and the studios’ claims that everything was as brilliant as ever. Even if the decade ended with great successes like *Gone with the Wind* or *The Wizard of Oz*, Hollywood earnings were still “flat” by 1941²⁷. At thousands of kilometers away, in distance and opportunities, fashion-consuming interwar Bucharest women could only enjoy their favorite stars onscreen and try to emulate their style and mannerisms to the best of their talent and possibilities. They had some chance to reach a significant cinema studio, if not across the Atlantic, at least in Paris or Berlin, through actual dramatic studies or beauty contests. A rare

¹⁹ McLean, “Introduction”, 7.

²⁰ Adam Knee, “Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: Modernizing Class”, in *Glamour in a Golden Age: Movie Stars of the 1930s*, ed. Adrienne L. McLean (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), (196–219) 196.

²¹ Knee, “Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers”, 199.

²² *Ibid*, 196–7

²³ Croce, *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 6.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 16

²⁶ Gallafent, *Astaire & Rogers*, 6.

²⁷ McLean, “Introduction”, 3.

but prominent example was 1920s movie actress of Romanian heritage, Pola Illéry, who admitted she was first noticed through a beauty contest²⁸. But when *Roberta* arrived in Bucharest, beauty pageants, including the two parallel *Miss Romania* contests, were already in their waning phases, and the dream to become a star was beginning to be replaced by the need to survive, especially as World War Two was menacingly approaching²⁹.

The Romanian cinema press followed the general trend of representing the so-called “cinematographic art”, from emphasizing the potential to reflecting the reality of a “fully realized aesthetic expressivity” between the last years of the nineteenth century and the 1930s³⁰. The dedicated press crystallized these phenomena, beginning in 1914 with a bilingual bi-monthly that lasted only four issues due to the start of World War One. Titled *Viața cinematografică în România, Bulgaria, Serbia, Grecia, Turcia și Egipt (Cinematographic Life in Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, Türkiye, and Egypt)*, the magazine was to be a “contact point between worldwide film ‘manufacturers and cinematographic entrepreneurs in this geographical area’”. At that time, however, the public did not present any interest to the editors, leading to a “lack of any column for appreciations on film, for the use of spectators”. From a semiotic perspective, however, the juxtaposition of creator-public-product is essential. As author Gillian Dyer noted, in terms of advertising, both readers and spectators “have actively to introduce cultural codes to interpret a sign by uniting signifier and signified”³¹. The true meaning and significance of a material, cultural, or aesthetic product cannot be ascertained without considering the input of the individuals experiencing it in real life. This necessity was finally met in 1923. Nestor Cassvan’s *Filmul (The Film)* magazine extended the reach to the “greater public and those who strive to satisfy its thirst for beauty”, also featuring a weekly film review³². By the 1930s, Romanian film critics had gained experience and professionalism with the advent of critics like Ion Cantacuzino, D.I. Suchianu, or Alexandru Calistrat, alongside reviews and opinions from prominent cultural figures³³. Hollywood has come to occupy the minds and pages of interwar Bucharest’s intelligentsia and regular Western culture consumers

²⁸ Jean Mihail, *Filmul românesc de altădată* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1967), 162.

²⁹ See Sonia D. Andraş, “Beauty and Nation: Miss Romania as International Ambassador”, in *Studies on Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue*, ed. Iulian Boldea, vol. 1 (Târgu-Mureş: Arhipelag XXI Press, 2013), 424–31, <https://old.upm.ro/ldmd/LDMD-01/Cpr/Cpr%2001%20053.pdf> for an overview of beauty pageants in interwar Romania.

³⁰ Bujor T. Ripeanu, “Cristalizarea conceptului de ‘artă cinematografică’ în publicistica românească a anilor 1896–1930”, in *Contribuții la istoria cinematografiei în România. 1896–1948*, ed. Ion Cantacuzino (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1971), (47–57) 47.

³¹ Dyer, *Advertising as Communication*, 128.

³² Tudor Caranfil, “De la reflectarea publicitară la actul critic. Contribuții la studiul consemnării evenimentului cinematografic în presa românească de după primul război mondial”, in *Contribuții la istoria cinematografiei în România. 1896–1948*, ed. Ion Cantacuzino (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1971), (181–94) 181.

³³ *Ibid.*, 189–92.

alike. *Roberta* was no exception. Nevertheless, building on Tudor Caranfil's contention that, even with notable critics, film review columns in the 1930s were indistinguishable from advertising³⁴, *Roberta's* representation between 1935 and 1937 blended genuine critique and promotional materials. Even more, the Astaire-Rogers emphasis on dance also led critics to start from the assumption that such movies were built around (recyclable) dancing numbers and thus lacked any deeper meaning or even a coherent plot³⁵.

Beyond its cinematic and economic value, *Roberta* also included a celebration of Americanness, veiled through a foreigner's gaze, that of Stephanie, "who is made to express approval of Americans over all nationalities"³⁶. Huck falls into a category of characters associated with Fred Astaire, the graceful, less virile but elegant leading man³⁷. This type of character blends appeals to the moviegoing public's personality and realities while also playing upon a certain longing for nobility and elegance, as film theorist Peter William Evans put it, blending British and American stereotypes of masculinity and social structure:

At one level, Astaire, the epitome of courtesy, fits the English "gentleman" ethos and persona so admired by 1930s Hollywood (which put under contract stars like Ronald Colman, as well as Leslie Howard) but by retaining the all-American classlessness and democratic credentials that slip out from under his exterior refinement, he appeals to mass audiences who see him in ideal versions of themselves. The films pause for moments of self-consciousness and healthy cynicism towards not only itself but also the "top hat, white tie, and tails" persona and milieus that at one level so define Astaire. The sophisticated and classy metropolitan concealed within him not only comedic and Baudelarian reserve but also the clear-sightedness of the ordinary individual³⁸.

When *Roberta* arrived in Bucharest, all parties involved knew what to expect and how to navigate the cinematographic experience. As Bujor T. Rîpeanu observed in a 1970s retrospective of Romanian cinema culture in the first decade of the interwar era, Romanian authorities established rules in the spring of 1934 to follow all film projection. The three main issues addressed by the State were financing measures intended to create a "national cinematography fund", "support and encouragement measures" for private businesses and individuals with a mandatory Romanian newsreel at every projection and an attempt to gradually introduce compulsory Romanian dubbing for "several foreign films", to "encourage capitalists to invest their funds into equipping some sound recording studios" that were virtually inexistent in Romania at the time, and to train technicians and actors "necessary to future film production". This situation was not

³⁴ Ibid, 194.

³⁵ Gallafent. *Astaire & Rogers*, 8.

³⁶ Peter William Evans, *Top Hat* (Chichester and Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 22.

³⁷ Ibid, 22–23.

³⁸ Ibid, 23.

unique to Romania or its increasingly authoritarian regime. As Spaner noted, movie quotas were dictated throughout Europe, including France, to prevent foreign productions – namely Hollywood – from overtaking local films³⁹. However, the Romanian State also benefitted from new taxation measures, including a ten lei tax per imported film meter, which, according to Rîpeanu's estimation, would amount to a yearly profit of at least eight million lei, adding to the "several millions" gained from the ticket tax⁴⁰. Despite the favorable circumstances, also using foreign films like *Roberta* through various import taxation policies to fund such efforts⁴¹, creating a domestic film industry system still had decades to wait.

Regarding fashion business, *Roberta* followed the path set by prominent *haute couture* designers for titles representing both an individual's and the company's name. As Gallafent observed, unlike its original Broadway musical version, the movie *Roberta* does not clarify the origin of the fashion house's name, thus "raising the question of the obscure ways in which names and titles are bestowed and thus what they might mean"⁴². But the costume choice for Astaire-Rogers film, *Roberta* included, could be summed up by the idea expressed in promoting their following hit, *Top Hat*, as "part of a strategy that also exemplified the New Deal's attempts to solve the post-Depression crisis through consumerism". In other words, the display of lavish clothes onscreen was not intended as character expression but as a visual means "that allows audiences to take momentary vicarious pleasure from contemplating the privileges of wealth"⁴³. Fashion and cinema-consuming interwar Bucharesters who dreamed of Hollywood but could not easily access genuine glamour and *haute couture* items were also complicit in this game of imagination with some associated narrative value.

Fashioning *Roberta*

Funny Face remains relevant in the interwar and the Astaire fashion musical story. Originally titled *Smarty* and based upon a book by Fred Thompson and Paul Gerard Smith, the musical opened in 1927 at the Alvin Theater in New York and was directed by Edgar MacGregor, with Fred and Adele Rogers in the starring roles, choreographed by Bobby Connolly and with music by George and Ira Gershwin⁴⁴. Unlike the 1957 significant refashioning with Hepburn as a female lead, the original play's reception was described as lukewarm, that "never became a standard and has rarely been recorded by successive artists, an aspect by which a

³⁹ Spaner, *Shoot It*, 12.

⁴⁰ Rîpeanu, "Cristalizarea conceptului de 'artă cinematografică,'" 71.

⁴¹ Ibid, 73.

⁴² Gallafent, *Astaire & Rogers*, 24.

⁴³ Evans, *Top Hat*, 14.

⁴⁴ Gershwin Enterprises, "Funny Face [S]", Composer Resource, *Gershwin.Com* (blog), 2023, Accessed September 11, 2023, <https://gershwin.com/publications/funny-face-show/>.

song's success is often measured". This situation was most likely due to the inherent connection to Astaire, engendering difficult or even impossible reproducibility. Furthermore, producer and composer Roger Eden wrote the 1957 Astaire-Hepburn production script for Paramount Pictures before using the *Funny Face* title and Gershwin's music. Astaire was cast as the male lead, but as his pair was Hepburn, the writers decided to change the brother-sister plot to a love story⁴⁵. While the connection between Astaire, dance, and fashion would nowadays tend to shift towards *Funny Face*, *Roberta*'s remains relevant to the sartorial and aesthetic aspirations of early-Classical Hollywood. The 1935 movie thus deserves more research and moviegoing attention in costume and cinema history, sociology, and cultural studies (fashion, media, gender, performance studies). On a more personal level, film theorist Edward Gallafent noted that Astaire-Rogers remain the only 1930s-1940s cinema pair still primarily known by their first names, Fred and Ginger, unlike Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy or Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall⁴⁶.

But while Fred and Ginger were billed on the movie posters, they were only the second leading pair. The headliner was Irene Dunne, whose story and interactions were more conventional for 1930s Hollywood productions. But in the context of this paper, the second leading dancing pair will be the show's stars. The fact their names were used everywhere in *Roberta*'s promotional visual and textual messaging was not accidental. RKO executives likely believed that adding the pair to an otherwise uneventful dramatic story could increase the movie's profitability. Astaire and Rogers were not the typical types cast in romantic stories. Huck falls into a category of characters associated with Fred Astaire, the graceful, less virile but elegant leading man⁴⁷. Knee asserted that Astaire was seen under a "sense of paradoxical ordinariness in combination with certain exceptional qualities", with a "slight build and lack of conventional handsomeness or sex appeal"⁴⁸. Rogers was not the ideal female lead in physical appearance, and most representations emphasized her "bright and lively personality"⁴⁹. In *Roberta*, their dynamic was not conventional either. All dances and costumes suggest mutuality:

[...] the partner dance is characterized by extended sequences where the two stand slightly apart and mirror each other closely, as well as other sequences where the two hold one another and move in swift, flowing steps with the pair's legs moving in unison (rather than, say, a dance in which the male guides the female into twirls and dips), and ends with the two dropping smoothly, synchronously, into nearby chairs, their energies spent⁵⁰.

⁴⁵ Rachel Fernandes, "The Lukewarm Reception of 'Funny Face,'" *The Gershwin Initiative*, January 15, 2019, Accessed September 11, 2023, <https://smt.d.umich.edu/ami/gershwin/?p=4506>.

⁴⁶ Gallafent, *Astaire & Rogers*, 6.

⁴⁷ Evans, *Top Hat*, 22–23.

⁴⁸ Knee, "Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers", 197.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 198.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 210–1.

As a “felicitously matched couple”, Astaire and Rogers become a “structural contrast to a narratively more central romantic couple”, namely the one played by Dunne and Scott. As Knee put it, Huck and Lizzie were “small-town Americans in a European setting”, created by the studio as “a sumptuous and modern fantasy world owing to the RKO art department’s deco set settings”⁵¹. Indeed, as Munich put it, contrasting the Parisian setting with its all-American cast and mostly-American characters, *Roberta* unfolded “plots, subplots, and characters in service of a romance with middle-American, small-town, plain forthrightness that might appear discordant with its *soi-disant* French setting”⁵². Furthermore, Gallafent highlighted the transparency of “American writing”, even in the character names with “flimsily concealed” transatlantic references. For instance, the surname Gatz overtly references Jay Gatsby from the already ten-year-old *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald⁵³. Huckleberry (Finn), Minnie (Mouse), and Lizzie (Borden) are no exception either⁵⁴. American aviator Amelia Earheart inspired one of the outfits even during the fashion parade⁵⁵. Beyond its cinematic and economic value, *Roberta* also included a celebration of Americanness, veiled through a foreigner’s gaze, that of Stephanie, “who is made to express approval of Americans over all nationalities”⁵⁶. Identified explicitly as “Indiana natives”, the American characters flaunted “a midwestern openness and naïveté that extends even to Aunt Minnie, who unaccountably has made a huge fashion success in Paris, despite her matronly appearance”, reminiscent of Margaret Dumont⁵⁷. Language and multi-layered ethnic, national, and racial identities and assumptions were part of the movie’s comedy, starting from its premise:

The plot launches on an American pun. Huck’s band sails to Paris for a nightclub gig under a Russian-born impresario’s misapprehension that he was getting a band of Native Americans. It is a joke that so unselfconsciously alludes to non-European residents of America that it seems to suggest a fundamental difference in the way that Americans and Europeans perceive their national authenticity, the Europeans bogged down in class-consciousness, and the Americans blithely entitled one and all⁵⁸.

However, Munich’s contention that Stephanie, the fashion designer, “might make more sense were she French”⁵⁹ could be contradicted by the idea that the epitome of fashionability, *la Parisienne*, does not have to be a native of Paris or even France to be deemed as such if she matches the elegance and the so-called

⁵¹ Ibid, 209.

⁵² Munich, “The Stars and Stripes”, 262.

⁵³ Gallafent, *Astaire & Rogers*, 25.

⁵⁴ Munich, “The Stars and Stripes”, 262.

⁵⁵ Evans, *Top Hat*, 31.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 22.

⁵⁷ Munich, “The Stars and Stripes”, 262.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

esprit Parisien, the Parisian spirit⁶⁰. A relevant example in the interwar era was Sonia Delaunay, the Ukrainian-French artist, designer, and an essential figure in the interwar Parisian Avant-Garde⁶¹. Elsa Schiaparelli, a more popular fashion creator, also associated with the Avant-Garde, was not born and raised in France, either. In *Roberta*, Paris is understood in its symbolic sense as equivalent to fashion, but in the movie's particular context, this 'Paris' was appropriated by American business, welcoming consumers. As Munich put it, "Middle-American business acumen absorbs European fashion sense in order to market it". This commercial aspect was also mirrored within the film's universe, in the sense of selling clothes, where the costumes included in the final parade were fifteen models copied from "American designer Bernard Newman" by the Modern Merchandising Bureau led by Bernard Waldman⁶². The financial aspect was not lost to Romanians either. On October 9, 1935, *Realitatea Ilustrată* included a photograph of RKO staff holding fur coats. The caption explained that the expensive fur coats and other luxurious garments estimated to cost "hundreds of thousands of dollars" used as costumes for *Roberta* had to be transported to California in armored automobiles and under armed protection to protect them from "attacks by gangsters"⁶³.

The lengthy music and dancing sequences without dialogue and the final fashion parade could be marketed as crucial to a movie's international appeal. However, Romanian film critics and the general moviegoing public were becoming attentive and exigent about acting and how believable actors were when delivering their lines. Still, *Roberta's* reviews, even when penned by Bucharest's intelligentsia, focused primarily on the costumes and performances, especially in the scenes with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Even for Romanian audiences, what was less noticed was that one of the models was presented as reserved for Queen Marie of Romania, while the other three were for "Mrs. Smudge in Pennsylvania". In a Romanian context, it is safe to assume that, in the early-to-mid 1930s, Queen Marie remained the epitome of elegance and fashionability, as a well-known fashion icon, even to the average American audience. Author and cultural historian Adrienne Munich explained the name "Smudge" implied a middle-class woman in an American context, and her juxtaposition with Queen

⁶⁰ For the international value of Paris fashion and culture, See Sophie Kurkdjian, "The Cultural Value of Parisian Couture", in *Paris, Capital of Fashion*, ed. Valerie Steele (London and New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), 101–21; Agnès Rocamora, "Paris, Capitale de La Mode: Representing the Fashion City in the Media", in *Fashion's World Cities*, ed. Christopher Breward and David Gilbert, *Cultures of Consumption* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), (43–54) 48–50; Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2017), 49–50.

⁶¹ See Sonia D. Andraș, "Fashioning Simultaneous Migrations: Sonia Delaunay and Inter-War Romanian Connections", *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty* 13, no. 2 (December 1, 2022): 229–53, https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb_00047_1, for an exploration of Sonia Delaunay's connections to interwar Romanian figures of the Avant-Garde, Tristan Tzara and Constantin Brâncuși, with Lizica Codreanu dancing in-between.

⁶² Munich, "The Stars and Stripes", 263.

⁶³ Image and Caption, *Realitatea Ilustrată*, October 9, 1935.

Marie was likely intended as a means of convincing potential buyers of merchandise quality and democratized exclusivity:

Mrs. Smudge brings high-falutin' fashion down to the level of the common woman, democratizing it while also allowing for gentle denigration of the fashion world. Is American Smudge trumping the Queen of Romania by ordering three to her one? Or do the multiples suggest a parvenu and hence a snobbish attitude toward democratization in mass-market fashion? The film has it both ways⁶⁴.

As a musical, *Roberta* also plays upon the power of music alongside the mirage of Hollywood with its stars, glamour, and overall performance. As fashion theorist Janice Miller noted, at the industry level, there is a "powerful relationship" between fashion and music, particularly in their promotion and adoption aspects. Where they diverge, however, is in their long-held, arguably stereotypical significations. Music has been held as a reflection of authenticity, while accusations of superficiality have riddled fashion. As Miller explained, this differentiation has been "cultivated by financial imperatives emanating less from performers themselves than those from behind the scenes", which she attributes to "postmodern culture" with its inherent links to capitalism⁶⁵. In this sense, as *Roberta* cannot fall into an *either/or* category, it could be described, in terms of the authentic-superficial dichotomy, as both ends of the spectrum and everything in-between, thus mirroring Bucharest's hybrid, multiple nature.

This could also be applied to the movie's interlaced stories. Fred and Ginger's stream was more than a love story or a glorified fashion film. Rogers' character became likable upon the discovery of her real identity as "Indiana Lizzie", turning from a rude and snotty client who "demands obsequious service from the shop staff," with a "caricature accent" into a "dancing sweetie pie"⁶⁶. Even if juxtaposed against the more traditionally masculine Scott, Astaire as Huck was not the comic relief. However, upon discovering she had faked her identity, he delved into comedy in his interactions and ensuing banter with the supposed Countess Scharwenka⁶⁷. Astaire's "Top Hat" type blends appeals to the moviegoing public's personality and realities while also playing upon a certain longing for nobility and elegance, as film theorist Peter William Evans put it, blending British and American stereotypes of masculinity and social structure:

At one level, Astaire, the epitome of courtesy, fits the English "gentleman" ethos and persona so admired by 1930s Hollywood (which put under contract stars like Ronald Colman, as well as Leslie Howard) but by retaining the all-American classlessness and democratic credentials that slip out from under his

⁶⁴ Munich, "The Stars and Stripes", 266.

⁶⁵ Janice Miller, *Fashion and Music* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2011), 27–28.

⁶⁶ Munich, "The Stars and Stripes", 263.

⁶⁷ Knee, "Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers", 209–10.

exterior refinement, he appeals to mass audiences who see him in ideal versions of themselves. The films pause for moments of self-consciousness and healthy cynicism towards not only itself but also the “top hat, white tie, and tails” persona and milieus that at one level so define Astaire. The sophisticated and classy metropolitan concealed within him not only comedic and Baudelarian reserve but also the clear-sightedness of the ordinary individual⁶⁸.

The dances communicate specific emotional and narrative messages, becoming “the most intimate connection with literal plot action”. According to Croce, in *Roberta*’s case, *I’ll Be Hard to Handle* presents the evolution of the pair’s love story from “casual friends” to “soulmates on their way to love”⁶⁹. The movie’s ending with a fashion show was one of the movie’s main mistrust points. Based on a “trifling piece of blueblood fiction”, only equipped with station but no character, *Roberta* would have worked as a novelty cinematic element in a 1919 context, but not in 1933, when the fashion show was interpreted “as if that were a kind of cop-out”⁷⁰. Fashion connected to musicals, and Astaire would receive more recognition in the 1950s with *Funny Face*. But *Roberta*’s fashion show set on the song *Lovely to Look At* sung by Irene Dunne, and included Lucille Ball among the models, but, as Croce quipped, it was “a pity that the dresses designed for the film are ugly to look at”. Croce also noted that the audience applauded “in relief” when Rogers appeared “in her simple bias-cut black satin”⁷¹. However, the parade is informative to a twenty-first-century audience as a source of “sartorial information”. According to Munich, the scene “initiates film viewers into an imaginary upper-crust life that takes place in well-dressed vignettes from noon to midnight”⁷². As with any Astaire-Rogers dancing number, there is a sense of feigned spontaneity, where viewers cannot ascertain whether they invented the steps as they dance or rehearsed them before filming. But even in the case of a set-up show, Astaire-Rogers movies do not require rehearsal scenes⁷³. The actual designer is also one of the mysteries that unfolded throughout the film. As Munich suggested, Minnie’s “unfashionability” was anything but paradoxical to *Roberta*’s creations. The main designer was, in reality, Sophie. In this sense, Munich contended that in its “almost decadent” portrayal, fashion was “done by Europeans, but America exports its good business head in the person of Aunt Minnie”⁷⁴.

Art historian and curator Marketa Uhlirova contended that the theoretical framing of fashion in film has remained ingrained in practices and perspectives dating as far back as the 1910s, blending the two cinematic streams of “narrative

⁶⁸ Evans, *Top Hat*, 23.

⁶⁹ Croce, *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book*, 7.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 46.

⁷¹ Ibid, 50.

⁷² Munich, “The Stars and Stripes”, 265.

⁷³ Gallafent, *Astaire & Rogers*, 27.

⁷⁴ Munich, “The Stars and Stripes”, 262.

feature film and fashion actuality, which was from 1909 presented in regular newsreels”, with little distinction between the understanding of costume and fashion⁷⁵. Indeed, in historical fashion research, fashion refers to the capitalist, globalizing phenomenon based upon the consumption of everchanging products and ideas. Dress is a general term for clothing, while costume refers to a specific type of dress, indicating the wearer’s social, economic, professional, ethnic, artistic, or cultural background or allegiances⁷⁶. During *Roberta*’s production and distribution, film costumes were a popular element in reviews, albeit in an incipient, non-critical manner. By the time of *Funny Face*, cinema fashion critique and research were becoming more refined. Still, it needed a few more decades to fully bloom in an academic, fashion, and cinema research environment⁷⁷. Apart from interwar reviews, promotional materials, and insights, the research on a movie blending dancing, acting, and fashion as seen in Hollywood necessitates late-twentieth and twenty-first-century theoretical methods, terminology, and approaches. This paper, therefore, primarily uses fashion and cinema studies works from around the 1970s and 1980s to decode, frame, and interpret the mid-1930s musical *Roberta*.

Despite its intrinsic connection to fashion, *Roberta* was not conducive to a specific look, nor did it intend to promote its style. As seen with the extended time granted to parading fashion models, *Roberta* was more of a celebration and reflection of *haute couture*. However, even if it does not adopt the noun as intended in fashion marketing successes like Dior’s 1947 *New Look*⁷⁸, *Roberta* does so with the verb on several layers. Characters look at each other, clients look at the fashion models and the main characters performing in high fashion garments, and, especially important in this paper, amateur moviegoers and film critics alike look at the spectacle on the screen. On the other hand, as Block suggested, the fact that the movie was an almost contemporary adaptation of a novel and then a Broadway show can provide a rare clue as to how American stage productions looked like in the mid-1930s. This phenomenon occurred because prior to 1940, all reference materials were “comparatively rare and incomplete”, including recordings with the original cast, studio albums, librettos, and scores. The complete stage production could only be experienced by worldwide audiences, starting a decade later with movies like *Gigi*. On the other hand, 1936-1937 Bucharesters who did not see the actual stage shows, experienced the movie differently, particularly as its cinematic adaptation relied heavily on the Fred and Ginger pair. Because of this, only four of the original songs

⁷⁵ Marketa Uhlířová, “Fashion in Cinema: Reframing the Field”, in *The Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*, ed. Eugenia Paulicelli, Veronica Manlow, and Elizabeth Wissinger (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), (351–61) 352–3.

⁷⁶ See Andraș, “Fashion, Dress, Costume: A Proposed Terminological Clarification in the Historical Research of Women’s Clothing”, *Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane »Gheorghe Șincai« al Academiei Române* 24 (2021): 194–212.

⁷⁷ Uhlířová, “Fashion in Cinema”, 352–3.

⁷⁸ Juliet Ash, “The Business of Couture”, in *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses*, ed. Angela McRobbie (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), (208–14), 208.

were kept, namely, *Let's Begin*, *Yesterdays*, *I'll Be Hard to Handle*, and *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, with added dance numbers. It is also likely that the general public did not care about *Roberta's* previous versions and focused their attention on Fred and Ginger. But as Block contended, audiences could still hear much of the original soundtrack as the "generous orchestral background music", besides the songs that were kept, even if the interpreter was a different character than in the original play⁷⁹.

***Roberta's* Impact in the Real World**

Roberta belongs to a decade described by McLean as "hardly a golden age for Hollywood, characterized more by "griminess and turbulence than order and prosperity", marked by two major catastrophic events, the Great Depression in 1929 and the beginning of World War Two, in the decade's last year. This age of upheavals was then transposed directly and indirectly on the silver screen⁸⁰. Romanians were keenly aware and felt the direct impact of multiple levels of political, economic, and social crisis moments, as they wished, not unlike moviegoers everywhere in the world, to find a temporary safety raft for their otherwise distressing and dim reality. McLean asserted this "curious juncture" meant that "the end looks rather more like the beginning than one might have expected" regarding box office and fiscal data⁸¹. Instead of profits, the 1930s created stars, sailing at the whims of the public ranging from small-town farmers to modern city dwellers and of the studios who expected maximum profits and harshly punished any digression⁸². Yet a minority of actors, besides Astaire, Cary Grant, and Myrna Loy, managed to sway their contracts with the studios to their advantage. In the 1930s, Astaire's lawyer had negotiated his RKO contracts and included a clause barring studios from using scenes from his movies without the dancing star's prior approval⁸³. But the Fred and Ginger partnership was lucrative while it lasted. Its promotion and popularity in Romania duplicated and mirrored similar practices in the United States and beyond.

But when the Broadway musical *Roberta* became the movie of the same name, it benefited from Hollywood's vigorous marketing machine. Advertisements can be semiotically interpreted as "specific discourses or structures of signs" instead of discourse conveying messages invisibly or transparently reflecting reality⁸⁴. The primary purpose of advertising is selling commodities, translating

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ McLean, "Introduction", 1.

⁸¹ Ibid, 3.

⁸² Ibid, 4.

⁸³ Joan Kramer and David Heeley, *In the Company of Legends* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2015), 13.

⁸⁴ Gillian Dyer, *Advertising as Communication*, Studies in Culture and Communication (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 115.

“statements about objects into statements about types of consumer and human relationships”⁸⁵. *Roberta* was a material (film reel and associated merchandise) and symbolic (the film as projected) commodity. Cinemas paid for the film with associated national and international taxes and earned an income from cinema consumers who bought tickets to see the movie. Considering the broader implications of Hollywood in fashion consumption, one can assume a range of uncounted costs and income generated by individuals who wished to look like the stars on the screen, likely anticipated by keen merchants. But as movie critic and journalist David Spaner contended, there is a clear distinction between internationalism and globalization, making them “as different as volunteering to fight fascism in Spain in 1937 and outsourcing Nike production to a non-union zone in China in 2007”. In his view, internationalism relates to “diverse local cultures joining to find common humanity across borders”, while globalization suggests “worldwide homogenization”⁸⁶. While cinema productions, like the fashion systems, involve an overall succession of creative, cultural, economic, and even ideological components, Spaner pointed out a lack of interest in what he termed as “the globalization of culture” as opposed to “the globalization of economies”, but “this conflict between internationalism and globalization” is even more deleterious to local customs and cultures. As Spaner continued, language, or the lack of it, in the case of globally distributed products, can pose a problem. Even if English may be understood as “the studio’s language of choice”, it poses complications, especially in the case of untranslatability. This problem is alleviated in twenty-first-century movies with extended action scenes and computer-generated effects that can easily replace dialogue⁸⁷. However, this is not a new issue for Hollywood studios with intentions to spread their products worldwide. The problem generated by the advent of talkies in the late 1920s and early 1930s had a strong basis on the idea of telling stories without (spoken) words, adding to the increased costs implied by sound recording and editing equipment. While Hollywood managed to fall on its feet relatively swiftly, the independent Romanian film industry virtually collapsed⁸⁸. When *Roberta* was filmed, talking cinema was established, and the international public had become accustomed to subtitles or dubbing. This phenomenon applied to Bucharest’s cinemagoing public as well.

The movie’s marketing campaigns preceded the first Bucharest show by several weeks. As with its pre-release vigorous promotion, reviews for *Roberta* abounded throughout the specialized or general interwar Bucharest press. As early as August 29, 1935, the cultural newspaper *Rampa* already announced *Top Hat* as

⁸⁵ Ibid, 116.

⁸⁶ David Spaner, *Shoot It! Hollywood Inc. and the Rise of Independent Film* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012), 10.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁸⁸ See Sonia D. Andraș, “Fashion, Cinema, and German–American Propaganda in 1930s Bucharest”, *Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane »Gheorghe Șincai« al Academiei Române*, vol. 25 (2022): (211–35) 228–9, for a detailed outline of Romanian cinema between Hollywood and German cinema.

the fourth movie with the “seductive couple”, mentioning in passing that Bucharesters would soon also see them in *Roberta*⁸⁹. On September 25, *Roberta* occupied *Realitatea Ilustrată*’s fourth cover entirely, with an illustrated article announcing the movie’s upcoming release, likely a promotional material translated into Romanian⁹⁰. By October 10, the same *Rampa* mentioned *Roberta* again, but with Dunne as the movie’s main star, while Fred and Ginger were relegated to a first mention in the second paragraph. The anonymous film reporter stated that the movie was the season’s first musical in Bucharest. Yet, the author thought it necessary to inform the public it was not the typical production in the genre. Indeed, it was “not a little comedy with two revue tableaux at the end”. Instead, it was a “great musical and dancing film from its first to its last scene”, supported by “ingenious and extremely amusing actions” and a plethora of comedic scenes. As the author described it, on this backdrop, Astaire and Rogers triumphally weave “the wonderful dance scenes”. The headliner was “the magnificent Irene Dunne”, about whom it was commonly believed she was “not only an excellent actress but also an admirable singer”, justifying her American nickname as the “girl with a golden voice”. The reporter presented the film as an adaptation from a Broadway production by Jerome Kern, “Broadway’s greatest contemporary composer”, after it had first “graduated from a series of 1000 shows on the stage”. The author mentioned the movie’s songs, whose foreign popularity was “thoroughly unusual”, and predicted they would equally enchant Bucharesters. Even if Dunne was presented as the lead, the article justified the movie’s sure success with the unrivaled Fred and Ginger. With an “elastic and light like a feather” “Astaire” and the “graceful and full of femininity” “Ginger”⁹¹, the couple “incarnates, indisputably, rhythm itself” as seen in previous movies. The article also mentioned the fashion parade at the end, with “ultramodern creations from America’s greatest model illustrator, Bernard Newmann”, worn by “ten superb girls”⁹². The film reporter concluded that Bucharesters could expect a work of “variety and multiple attractions, destined for sure success”⁹³.

The movie reached Bucharest around the same time, seven months after its release. It was first shown concomitantly at the cinemas *Capitol* on Elisabeta Boulevard and *Roxy* on Lipscani Street, within the so-called Old Town area of Bucharest’s center. Advertisements about the movie abounded throughout interwar Romania. On October 15, 1935, the French-language daily *Le Moment*, dedicated to Bucharest’s francophone elite, presented *Roberta* in terms of its American success as a fashion and dance extravaganza⁹⁴. By the 24th, *Le Moment*’s regular

⁸⁹ “Un cuplu celebru”, *Rampa*, August 29, 1935, 3.

⁹⁰ “Muzică, dans, fast în strălucita comedie Roberta. O capodoperă de grație, fantezie și umor”, *Realitatea Ilustrată*, September 25, 1935, 24.

⁹¹ The article referred to them as “Astaire and Ginger”.

⁹² Originally in Romanian, “zece girls superbe”.

⁹³ “Irene Dunne, vedetă de film muzical, în „Roberta””, *Rampa*, October 10, 1935, 3.

⁹⁴ “Cinemas”, *Le Moment*, October 15, 1935, 2.

movie chronicle section, usually signed by M.C. or M.I.C., in this case using the latter, was dedicated to *Roberta*. It is worth noting that M.I.C. was likely Mateiu Ion Caragiale, the writer and poet, the son of writer, playwright, and publicist Ion Luca Caragiale⁹⁵. M.I.C. was especially enthralled by the dance performances, as a cinematic delight that presented exquisite luxurious fashion House of Roberta creations but also a subtle satire of exiled Russian aristocrats⁹⁶. The *Capitol* and *Roxy* run ended by early November, but *Cinema American* on Moșilor Avenue promptly picked up the baton⁹⁷. By May the following year, Bucharesters could still see *Roberta* at the *Orfeu* cinema, also on Elisabeta Boulevard, like *Capitol*. This time, Astaire and Rogers shared the headline with the 1935 production *The Crusades*, directed by Cecil B. De Mille, starring Loretta Young and Harry Wilcoxon⁹⁸.

Despite the pair only playing “inflated supporting roles”, their impact remains major amid a production where “none of the characters has much definition and the story makes little sense”. The pair was easier “to build up with the kind of custom-tailored material”, which made Astaire-Rogers more vivid than Dunne and Scott’s couple⁹⁹. By the end of the movie, the *I Won’t Dance* reprise ends with Astaire and Rogers as “destiny’s tots”, dancing their way into their succeeding and much more successful movie, *Top Hat*, created especially for them¹⁰⁰. However, this rejection did not translate into profits. At its time, *Roberta* was a massive box office success, grossing 873,650 dollars, almost two hundred million more than their previous collaboration, *The Gay Divorce*¹⁰¹, making it the third most successful Fred and Ginger movie at its release¹⁰². Ordinary American and potentially global fashion consumers were also considered, especially in the final fashion show scene where it “assumes a Parisian façade and claims cosmopolitan taste to sell its wares to American natives of the Great Plains”¹⁰³. The partnership’s gradual demise as the 1930s decade waned was likely due to Astaire’s wish to stand on his own feet, not as a half in a dancing pair, as he was first known alongside his sister. There were also disagreements between the two, particularly in the realm of costuming, with Astaire visibly distraught by Rogers’ impractical gowns even in the finished cinematic productions¹⁰⁴. But Rogers had become reluctant to encourage mentions of her pairing with Astaire, especially after she

⁹⁵ Mihail Straje, *Dicționar de pseudonime, anonime, anagrame, astronime, criptonime ale scriitorilor și publiciștilor români* (București: Minerva, 1973), 125–6.

⁹⁶ M.I.C., “Roberta”, *Le Moment*, October 24, 1935, 2.

⁹⁷ “Cinematografe”, *Adevărul*, November 3, 1935, 6.

⁹⁸ “Cinematografe”, *Adevărul*, May 14, 1936, 6.

⁹⁹ Croce, *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰¹ Evans, *Top Hat*, 6.

¹⁰² Block, “Refashioning Roberta”, 40.

¹⁰³ Munich, “The Stars and Stripes”, 265.

¹⁰⁴ Kramer, Heeley, *In the Company of Legends*, 17–18.

managed to make a name for herself as a serious actress, winning an Oscar for Best Actress in *Kitty Foyle*¹⁰⁵. These phenomena were easily noticeable in interwar Bucharest, from promotional published or displayed materials to film reviews in the press throughout the ideological spectrum. As seen in *Rampa*, the Fred and Ginger pair was already a beloved staple of Bucharest's cinemagoing experience, sparking the enthusiasm of worldwide film lovers, owing to their "grace, suppleness, the assurance in their attitudes"¹⁰⁶.

Life after *Roberta*

Like its pre-release fourth-cover presentation of *Roberta*, *Realitatea Ilustrată* (*The Illustrated Reality*) published an anonymous article dedicated to the 1936 movie *Top Hat*¹⁰⁷, also starring the pair. However, unlike the *Roberta* piece, *Realitatea Ilustrată* presented a more localized – and arguably individualized – perspective of *Top Hat*. According to the article, one would not exaggerate when claiming that Astaire and Rogers had created a new film style. The anonymous author claimed that before them, there were no movies where "main characters expressed their feelings through...dance". But as the author explained, it was not enough for them to be exquisite dancers. For such a genre to gain traction, the stars had to be "distinguished actors, congenial, imaginative, with a sense of humor, with verve", which "wonderfully compliments their choreographic virtuosity". The article then briefly outlined Astaire's career, who was more than a movie star, as "cinema had abducted him from the theatre". He became known on Broadway as a young leading man in operettas and musical comedies. According to the author, his originality, "of course", stemmed from the fact that he both acted and sang his roles. He maintained a long-term partnership with his "more famous" sister, Adele Astaire. Following his sister's retirement from the stage after marrying Lord Charles Arthur Francis Cavendish in 1932, the actor-dancer performed solo and danced alongside Joan Crawford in *Dancing Lady*¹⁰⁸ in 1933. Later the same year, the R.K.O Radio Company set Ginger Rogers as his new partner in the movie *Carioca*. As the author explained, the movie's success was a decisive factor for "the destiny of the Astaire Rogers team"¹⁰⁹ that "consolidated its reputation" with the 1934 movie *Continental*¹¹⁰ and was eventually consecrated with *Roberta*. The overall impression presented by *Realitatea Ilustrată*'s anonymous reporter was that

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 15.

¹⁰⁶ "Un cuplu celebru", 3.

¹⁰⁷ Referred to as *Tophat* (sic), translated into Romanian as *Piccolino*.

¹⁰⁸ Translated in Romanian as *Venus dansează* (*Venus Dances*).

¹⁰⁹ The article referred to it as "destinul *teamului* Astaire Rogers (the destiny of the Astaire Rogers team)".

¹¹⁰ Translated in Romanian as *Divorțul Vesel* (The Jolly Divorce).

Top Hat surpassed all Astaire-Rogers productions so far after consulting “foreign critiques – American, British and French” the movie’s global networks¹¹¹. Indeed, the Astaire-Rogers pair was unusual in its emphasis on dance, which ultimately amounted to their unprecedented and unparalleled global popularity:

Although Astaire and Rogers did many things in their movies besides dance – the way they looked and read their lines and wore their clothes and sang a hit without dancing to it – it was through their dancing that the public grew to love them and to identify their moods, the depth of their involvement, and the exquisite sexual harmony that made them not only the ideal dancing couple but the ideal romantic team. No dancers ever reached a wider public, and the stunning fact is that Astaire and Rogers, whose love scenes were the dances, became the most popular team the movies have ever known¹¹².

As Croce had noted in the early 1970s, the movie itself was no longer circulated by the 1940s, and it was not shown on television, making it at the time “the least known and least discussed of the Astaire-Rogers films”¹¹³. Author Homer Dickens also mentioned this situation, pointing out that when MGM bought the rights for the movie in 1951, they retitled the remake *Lovely to Look At* after Jimmy McHugh’s song featured in the original *Roberta*. As he explained, by the early 1950s, *Roberta* “has had only a few random screenings in Los Angeles and New York and has never been viewed on television, where the other Astaire-Rogers pictures always prove popular”. But from Ginger Rogers’s perspective, Dickens stated it was her first opportunity to act alongside Astaire, with a good “sassy French accent”, with which she even sang¹¹⁴. According to Croce, *Roberta*’s identification as a “minor and unrepresentative film” could be attributed to Astaire and Rogers being billed alongside Irene Dunne. Countering this “legend”, Croce claimed *Roberta* is, in fact, a “key film”, widening the pair’s range as it “establishes them unshakably as a team”. *Roberta* turned “Astaire and Rogers” into “Astaire-Rogers”¹¹⁵. Studio executives, distributors, and other individuals and entities involved in movie production and promotion profited from this partnership during its active years and for the decades to come. While *Roberta* has not been given much attention after its runtime, Fred and Ginger remain a widespread symbolic marker of everything Hollywood, read as everything American. Interwar Bucharesters gladly joined the twists and swirls of their dances, especially as the Romanian cinema industry could and did not produce anything to rival the pair in artistry, imagination, or overall entertainment value. In terms of its legacy, *Roberta* provides, as Block put it, a double service. On the one hand, it is one of the

¹¹¹ “„PICCOLINO” Un nou film cu Fred Astaire și Ginger Rogers, muzica de Irving Berlin”, *Realitatea Ilustrată*, April 15, 1936, 22.

¹¹² Croce, *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book*, 5.

¹¹³ Ibid, 46.

¹¹⁴ Dickens, *The Films of Ginger Rogers*, 18.

¹¹⁵ Croce, *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book*, 46.

immortal pieces in the Fred and Ginger catalog. On the other, it can be construed as an “early model of film adaptation of the Broadway musical that succeeds on its terms” and may even be considered better than its original stage version in terms of its “dramatic power, musical interest, and visual appeal”. From the latter, Block concluded *Roberta* offered the framework for “the great (and not so great) film adaptations ahead, adaptations ‘lovely to look at’ and ‘delightful to know’”¹¹⁶.

But at its time and in the eyes of RKO and other financially interested parties, *Roberta* was construed, presented, and interpreted as a money-maker, adding the popular Fred and Ginger pair to a relatively well-known Broadway play inspired by a contemporary novel. Despite Spaner’s contention that twenty-first-century film studios have turned into “massive corporate entities with a devastating impact on the quality of movies and local film cultures”, it could be argued that profits drove moviemaking even in the early days of Classical Hollywood cinema. Hollywood has remained the primary type of cinema the Romanian public consumed for decades. Yet, by 2012, when Spaner published his book on independent worldwide cinema, he considered the Romanian New Wave cinema important enough for an entire chapter titled *Romania: Out of Silence*¹¹⁷. The “silence” he referred to could imply Romania’s creative limitations before the 1989 Revolution and the relative anonymity of Romanian filmmaking before the early 2000s. But as he noted, despite Romania’s silent movies not being “particularly distinguished”, by the 1920s, the country boasted 250 movie theatres. In the 1940s, as Spaner put it, when “fascist Ion Antonescu took power in 1940, his Axis government commandeered the country’s production facilities for propaganda purposes”¹¹⁸. The Romanian State’s love affair with propaganda film did not start, as Spaner claimed, in 1940. It was established well into the 1930s and strengthened during King Carol II’s royal dictatorship. Furthermore, the word “propaganda” itself was used positively for creative pursuits, including domestic film production and connected artistic or promotional activities¹¹⁹. Antonescu only took over a machine that was already running vigorously. While *Roberta* has not remained a staple of interwar Bucharest cinema culture, its brief run throughout the Romanian capital proved Bucharesters were not only interested in Hollywood, despite an increasingly violent tilt to the right. A movie like *Roberta* started with a run on two cinemas, then moved slowly away from the central tourist areas, into apparent oblivion.

Beyond the Hollywood and performance dimension, the Astaire-Rogers dance scenes offer lessons on various social issues and interactions. Former nurse and education and health consultant Connie R. Curran used the partnership’s dancing numbers where they “seemed to float over the dance floor, swirl seamlessly, and smile the entire time”, as leadership lessons directed towards

¹¹⁶ Block, “Refashioning *Roberta*”, 50.

¹¹⁷ Spaner, *Shoot It*, 219–32.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 220.

¹¹⁹ Andraş, “Fashion, Cinema, and German–American Propaganda”, 228–32.

nurses, highlighting the importance of wisdom in selecting a partner. As she explained, for the pair to work as they did, regardless of Astaire's gift, Rogers needed to be even more talented, as "she was going to do all those steps in reverse, and in high heels". In Curran's assessment, Astaire's dancing abilities "would have been wasted if his partner slipped and stumbled". In this sense, Rogers then illustrates "a partner who maximizes your talents and other assets"¹²⁰. It is then safe to assume that the Astaire-Rogers human and technical dynamic the pair's worldwide popularity and endurance throughout the decades, even as the stars themselves moved on to individual projects. There may also be an assumption that capable women enhance men's abilities, perhaps at the cost of their interests and goals. However, regardless of how the partnership's dynamic is interpreted, it has endured the test of time amid a century of often abrupt social, cultural, and aesthetic shifts. Even if this was not necessarily articulated in 1930s reviews or dedicated articles, this short-lived duo remains relevant to this day as an interdisciplinary symbol blending visual, technical, and social prowess. This possibility to gain deeper insights by analyzing the performances and dynamics between Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, even almost a century later, could explain the ongoing fascination with the pair. It is also likely that their very on-and-off-screen relationship delighted and inspired the public beyond the technical aspects of acting and dancing.

Conclusion

Sometime in late-1935, Bucharesters were looking forward to another charming movie from the rising super-star dancing pair Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. This time, they followed the lead of Irene Dunne to tell a story about social change, exile, fashion, and Paris as the land of opportunity, even for Americans, all weaved into romance. Taking Hollywood as a marker of globalization, seeing Fred and Ginger on the silver screen in a decade of upheavals and great crises could help alleviate the pains and worries of men and women everywhere, from Los Angeles to New York, through Paris, and finally in Bucharest. *Roberta's* Bucharest run lasted around two years, including its fashionable cinemas worthy of mention in the weekly schedules, starting with *Capitol* and *Roxy*, then *American*, and finally *Orfeu*. The movie's journey throughout 1930s Bucharest, from advertisements, promotional texts and announcements, reviews, and genuine film critique articles to its actual scheduling in theaters, offers a vivid example of the high interest and yearning for Hollywood in Romania. The various Hollywood productions and their worldwide trajectories, like *Roberta*, can offer cultural histories and studies an

¹²⁰ Connie R. Curran, "Everything That Fred Astaire Did, Ginger Rogers Did Backwards, and in High Heels", *Nursing Economics* 25, no. 1 (February 2007): (5, 11) 5.

avenue of research to uncover a world that would soon disappear. The entire cinema experience analysis then covers the multiple layers blending social, cultural, aesthetic, and ideological streams toward a new, comprehensive, panoramic image of the interwar world and its later echoes. Moviegoing was a breath of fresh air for individuals worldwide who otherwise lived gloomy lives marked by financial difficulties, increased state control, and especially as the specter of World War Two was approaching menacingly.